

**A speedy recovery to Rivkah bas Mazel Tov! Shana Tovah!**

**If our repentance is sincere, our sins will not be recalled.**  
(Ezekiel 18:22)

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Chicago	6:23	New York	6:29
Cleveland	7:00	Paris	7:22
Detroit	7:05	Philadelphia	6:33
Houston	6:55	Phoenix	6:02
Jerusalem	6:13	Pittsburgh	6:53
Johannesburg	5:47	Seattle	6:42
Los Angeles	7:26	Sydney	5:36
London	6:32	Tokyo	5:14
Miami	6:55	Toronto	6:51
Montreal	6:26	Washington DC	6:41

## Holidays

# Rosh Hashana

**RABBI BERNIE FOX**

"How does one confess? He says, "I beseech you Hashem. I have erred. I have willfully acted wrongly. I have acted rebelliously before you. I have (specify wrongdoing). I have

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## Fate



(New Year cont. from pg. 1)

## Holidays

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Weekly Journal on Jewish Thought



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**regret. I am embarrassed with my actions. I will never return to this behavior."** (Maimonides, Mishne Torah, Laws of Repentance 1:1)

This formulation of the confession is based upon a discussion found in Tractate Yoma. The majority of Sages suggest the formulation adopted by Maimonides. In this version, first errors or unintentional sins are confessed. Then reference is made to intentional wrong doing. Last acts of rebellion are included. The reasoning underlying this order is that a person should first seek forgiveness for lesser sins and then the more serious wrong doings.

However, the Talmud explains that Rav Meir suggests an alternative form for the confession. He suggests that first the confession should mention the willful sins. This is followed by mentioning acts of rebellion. The confession ends with reference to unintentional errors.

Rav Meir derives his order from the prayers of Moshe. In seeking forgiveness for Bnai Yisrael, Moshe describes the Almighty's attributes of mercy and kindness. He declared that because of these attributes Hashem forgives willful sins, acts of rebellion and unintentional errors. Rav Meir adopted this order for his formulation of the confession.

This observation helps explain the dispute between the Sages and Rav Meir. The Sages order the sins referred to in the confession from the least serious to the most severe. This order is dictated by a clear logic. The confession is a request for forgiveness. It is appropriate to begin with the lesser offenses.

Rav Meir maintains that the confession includes an additional element. It makes reference to the attribute of the Almighty responsible for forgiveness. Therefore the confession alludes to the prayer of Moshe in which the Divine attributes are described. Rav Meir maintains that as we ask for forgiveness, we must acknowledge the benevolence of the Almighty implicit in this forbearance.

Although the opinion of the Sages is accepted, the issue raised by Rav Meir finds expression in halacha. The confession contained in the liturgy is often accompanied by a recitation of the Divine attributes of the Almighty. This is accord with Rav Meir's opinion that confession is associated with recognition of Hashem's kindness. Although this recognition is not incorporated into the confession itself, it is associated to the confession through the liturgy.

**"Among the ways of repentance is for the repentant individual to constantly bemoan his sin before Hashem with crying and supplications. And he should give charity according to his ability. And he should distance himself, to an extreme, from the area concerning which he sinned. And he should change his name. In this he states, 'I am someone else and not that person who performed those actions.'"** (Maimonides, Mishne Torah, Laws of Repentance 2:4)

Maimonides describes, in this halacha, some of the behaviors which accompany repentance. He includes the establishment of a new identity. The sinner sees him / herself as a different person from the individual who committed the wrongdoing.

A person's behavior is strongly affected by self image. Once we establish a behavior or attitude it is difficult to imagine ourselves

without this element. This psychological barrier must be overcome if the process of Teshuva is to be successful. The person must become accustomed to a different self-image.

The Talmud discusses the life of Elisha ben Avuyah. This great scholar was the teacher of Rav Meir. In his studies, Elisha ben Avuyah delved into the most difficult areas of the Torah. He eventually discovered truths for which he was not prepared.

He could not accept these concepts and rejected the Torah. Elisha ben Avuyah went so far, in rejecting his former life, that he changed his name. Interestingly, he chose the name Acher. Literally translated, this name means "other". Through adopting this name, he explained that he intended to indicate that he was no longer Elisha ben Avuyah. He was a different person with new attitudes.

The Talmud comments that the Almighty declared that although all humanity has the opportunity to repent, Acher is an exception. He cannot repent his sins.

Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik ZTL explained that it is not the intention of the Talmud to indicate the Almighty will not accept Acher's repentance. Instead, the message of the Talmud is that Acher simply cannot repent. He does not have the ability.

Based on the teaching of Maimonides, this message can be easily understood. Elisha ben Avuyah established a new identity of Acher. Acher was an individual who lived a life

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antithetical to the Torah. As long as Elisha ben Avuyah viewed himself as Acher it would be impossible for him to repent. His self-image would prevent him from establishing a Torah outlook and life. Only once he removed this identity could he hope to repent.

**“It is customary to arise in the early morning to recite prayers of supplication from the beginning of the month of Elul until Yom HaKippurim.”** (Shulchan Aruch, Orech Chayim 581:1)

It is customary to recite Selichot – prayers of supplication – prior to Rosh HaShanna. Generally, these prayers are recited in the morning. According to Rav Yosef Karo this service is initiated on the first day of Elul. This is the custom generally accepted by Sefardic communities. Rav Moshe Isserles comments that the Ashkenazic custom is to begin reciting the Selichot from the Motzai Shabbat prior to Rosh HaShanna.[1]

The source for these two customs is discussed by Rabbaynu Nissim. He explains that the custom of Barcelona was to begin Selichot on the twenty-fifth day of Elul.[2] The Gaon of Vilna explained that this is the source of the Ashkenazic custom.[3]

In order to appreciate the Gaon’s conclusion, we need to better understand the practice of the Barcelona community. Rabbaynu Nissim explains the basis of this custom. This custom reflects the opinion that the sixth day of creation corresponds with Rosh HaShanna. The Almighty chose this day for Rosh HaShanna because it is associated with forgiveness. On this day Adam and Chava, representing humanity, committed the first sin. They disobeyed Hashem. They ate the fruit that the Creator had forbidden. The Almighty forgave this iniquity. On Rosh HaShanna we beseech Hashem for forgiveness. It is appropriate to appeal to the Almighty on the anniversary of the date that forgiveness was introduced into the universe. If Rosh HaShanna corresponds with the sixth day of creation, what calendar date corresponds with the first day of creation? This date is the twenty-fifth of Elul (Elul having twenty-nine days).[4]

We can now understand the Gaon’s comments. The Ashkenazic custom embodies the same message as the custom of Barcelona. The recitation of Selichot begins on the Motzai Shabbat before Rosh HaShanna. This corresponds with the initiation of creation on the first day of the week.

Rabbaynu Nissim explains the custom in

Gerona was to begin the recitation of Selichot on the first day of Elul. This date was also chosen because of its association with forgiveness. After the sin of the egel ha’zahav – the Golden Calf – Moshe ascended Har Sinai. He sought forgiveness for Bnai Yisrael. Moshe ascended the mountain of the first day of Elul. He secured the Almighty’s forgiveness forty days later. This day – the tenth of Tishrai – became Yom Kippur.

These two customs reflect two different aspects of Divine forgiveness. The forgiveness of received by Adam and Chava was not a result of repentance or prayer. In fact, both Adam and Chava minimized their role in committing the sin. Why were they forgiven? The Almighty created humanity and bestowed within us the unique ability to choose between good and evil. Every human enters life as an imperfect and instinctual creature. It is our responsibility to improve ourselves through the wise exercise of our freewill. It is inevitable that we will sin as we proceed along this path. Hashem forgives us for these failings just as He pardoned Adam and Chava. In short, the very design of creation allows for an imperfect individual and implies the Almighty’s forbearance and forgiveness.

The forgiveness at Sinai was achieved through supplication and prayer. Moshe ascended the mountain and beseeched the Almighty to forgive His people. As Moshe elevated Himself and rose to a higher spiritual level, he drew closer to Hashem. Through this process his prayers were accepted and Bnai Yisrael was forgiven.

Each custom reflects one of these aspects of forgiveness. The Ashkenazic custom reminds us of the forgiveness received by Adam and Chava. It recalls the forgiveness inherent in the design of creation. The Sefardic custom reminds us of the forgiveness achieved at Sinai. It recalls the forgiveness we can secure through personal spiritual effort and prayer.

**“There are those who are accustomed to eat a sweet apple with honey. And they say, “It should be granted to us a sweet year”.** (Shulchan Aruch, Orech Chayim 583:1)

The Shulchan Aruch lists many foods eaten at the Rosh HaShanna meal. Each food alludes to a specific blessing. The eating is accompanied with a short prayer requesting from Hashem the blessing associated with the food. The eating of the apple is mentioned by Rav Moshe Isserles. In different communities customs vary as to which foods are consumed. However, the apple seems to have been widely incorporated into the Rosh HaShanna meal.

It is somewhat difficult to understand this



custom. The Torah vigorously rejects all forms of superstition. It is very surprising that halacha should encourage a practice which seems to be based upon omen.

However, if carefully considered we can appreciate the meaning of this custom. It is not in any way an expression of superstition of primitive beliefs. For most of us the Rosh HaShanna experience is strongest while we are in the synagogue. There we pray for the fulfillment of our wishes in the coming year. We are actually aware of the process of heavenly judgment. Once we leave the synagogue we begin to become distracted. The Yom Tov meal, the opportunity to spend time with family and friends begin to compete for our attention. As the day passes we may forget the significance of the occasion.

Our Sages had a deep understanding of human behavior. They recognized this tendency towards distraction. Yet, the Rosh HaShanna experience should not be limited to the time spent in synagogue. The atmosphere of judgment should extend throughout the day. In order to accomplish this end the Sages encouraged the custom of eating special foods during the Yom Tov meal. Through this process an element of prayer is incorporated into the experience. Rather than the meal becoming a distraction, it reinforces the special atmosphere of the occasion. ■

[1] Rav Moshe Isserles, Comments on Shulchan Aruch, Orech Chayim 581:1.

[2] Rabbaynu Nissim, Notes to Commentary of Rabbaynu Yitzchak Alfasi, Mesechet Rosh HaShanna 3a.

[3] Rabbaynu Eliyahu of Vilna, Biur HaGra, Shulchan Aruch, Orech Chayim 581, note 8.

[4] Rabbaynu Nissim, Notes to Commentary of Rabbaynu Yitzchak Alfasi, Mesechet Rosh HaShanna 3a.



# Rosh Hashanah: God's Decrees

**RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM**

"All man's needs are decided for him, from Rosh Hashanah until Yom Kippur - except for his expenditures for Sabbath, for Holidays, and for his son's Torah study: in these, if he spends less, these funds will be detracted; if he spends more, he will receive more [for these]." (Talmud Betza 16a, first words)

A number of questions arise: why are not 'all' of our needs decided...why these three ongoing exceptions? What is the significance of these three mitzvahs? And in general, why is there a yearly decree at all...such long-lasting effects? That is, why must there be a yearly decree that remains unchanged until next year? Nonetheless, for some reason, it is necessary that God decree for man in these two fashions: yearly, and regularly. Can we determine why this must be?

The plain understanding of this Talmudic portion teaches that man receives a monetary judgment for the coming year. During the 10 Days of Repentance, we accept that we are being judged, so we act our best. This

is the purpose of being informed of the judgment: God wants our judgment to be the best. So He warns us to be on guard and act in pristine style, and our actions will determine our sustenance, since how we act during these days, is truly a display of our innermost values. Thereby, God is judging us not based on a distracted lifestyle, but a manner of living that truly conveys what we feel is most vital. God is generous with this judgment, by not viewing our actions year round as a sampling of our values, but we are judged based on these 10 days alone.

So the question arises: why are there three exceptions? We also wonder why the response to our generous spending on Sabbath, Holidays and our son's Torah study, is met with a reimbursement. Why that specific response?

It would appear that God is relating to us, according to how we relate to Him. If we are not cheap with our spending on these three mitzvahs, then we demonstrate a proper relationship to our wealth: its primary purpose is in service to God. If this is how we act, then God will grant us more wealth for next Sabbath, and other holidays. We should not worry that spending our earnings on these mitzvahs will in any way detract from what we need for rent, mortgage, clothes, etc. This is a justifiable concern, that we might exhaust our funds long before the year is over. So God responds by reimbursing expenditures on these three mitzvahs. But why these three mitzvahs in specific? Why are we not reimbursed for purchasing beautiful Tefillin, Tzitzis, Mezuzos, and other objects of mitzvah?

Sabbath celebrates the idea of God as Creator. Holidays recall His intervention...His providence. And providing not for OUR Torah study, but our children's, we show a concern that future generation benefits from receiving the Torah transmission. And this transmission's content is concerning the fundamentals of God - the Creator, and God as the One who remains involved in human affairs, as He expressed in our salvation celebrated on the three Festivals. Thus, Sabbath and Holidays focus on the "knowledge of God", while providing for our son's Torah insures this knowledge is transmitted to the "next generation".

So inasmuch as we demonstrate a correct relationship to our wealth by giving generously to these fundamental mitzvahs, God guarantees us that we will not lose anything thereby, and He will reimburse us, so we are not concerned about lacking anything else. God does not wish that these three mitzvahs were tempered in enthusiasm, by our monetary considerations. Therefore we are promised His reimbursement.

Perhaps also significant, is that Sabbath and Holidays are not momentary actions, as are Tefillin, Mezuza and other commands. These are "days", large units of time requiring a sustained attitude. These days are opportunities to revamp our very lifestyle. The drive of the Torah, is that man alters his orientation away from personal, emotional and infantile interests, redirecting himself towards God's wisdom and virtue. Sabbath and Holidays have Torah wisdom as their target...as does our son's study. Mitzvahs of such duration can offer the greatest impact on our perfection. But there is more...

As we said, God judges us all in two spheres. From Rosh Hashanah to Yom Kippur, we are judged for the next year to come. But we are also judged throughout the year, at many intervals. We are judged each week regarding our generosity in creating a beautiful Sabbath. And we are judged on how we beautify the Holidays. Finally, we are judged on how we respond to our son's Torah study. Do we forgo personal pleasures to insure our sons have the best teachers? Let's understand this distinction...why two spheres of judgment?

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### Man's Two Worlds

I believe God is responding to the two spheres in which man lives.

We are first, Earth-bound creatures. How do we relate to this existence? Are we money-hungry, gluttons, egomaniacs, and lustful? Or are we charitable, kind, and sympathize with others? Are we interested in the well being of all God's creations, now...and future generations?

If we take care to recognize God's relation with man: His Creation (Sabbath), and His sustained providence over us (Holidays), then we are living correctly. And if we take care to provide the next generation with Torah – securing our son's learning – then we are not only in full agreement with God's will, but that His will should endure on Earth...for others. That is perfection on the loftiest level: when the self is not the concern, and we spend money to insure that others realize God's will.

This is our Earthy perfection, on which we are judged at these intervals: at securing beautiful Sabbaths and Holidays, and instilling in the next generation – our sons – a fear of God, and His teachings, although we will be long gone. In these three areas, God metes out a type of reward and punishment throughout the year. Our perfection of spending our money on Sabbath, Holidays and the next generation's Torah education is enhanced by God's providence of replacing our expenditure, so we might continue. Thereby, God increases our perfection. Such a person realizes the true value and purpose of wealth, and therefore, he receives more. But if a person does not spend on these three areas, which express God's relationship with man, then God removes our monetary means. He does not wish that we are successful, if our monies are not spent well. For that would encourage a wrong lifestyle.

So this reimbursement is not our final reward, but since life by definition has duration, God regularly attends to our choices. God intervenes so as to secure our growth in these three mitzvahs.

But we also live in another sphere, outside an Earthly existence. We are cognizant of our

ultimate existence: the eternal existence of our souls. This is quite literally our true existence. For it is in this final stage of our lives, that we are permanently fixed. Even 1000 years on Earth does not compare. Perhaps the fact we are judged yearly, and judged on whether we live or die as well, is a means through which God generously awakens us to this denied reality of our "mortality".

God wishes that we don't ignore the eternity of our souls, but simultaneously, He does not wish we live in morbidity, "Also the world (immortality) has He placed in their hearts". (Koheles, 3:11) This, Ibn Ezra says, means that man denies death. But our denial appears to be God's will, since "He placed the world in our hearts". Therefore, only 10 days each year, do we focus on a decree with long-lasting effects: the decree that is sealed each Yom Kippur. Realizing this yearly decree, we are now awakened to the ultimate decree: the decree we face at death. But this realization is a gift, to refocus us on our true mission. The yearly decree is to remind us of the truly everlasting decree. If we are wise, we prepare for the final existence, so we might enjoy it thoroughly. As the Rabbis teach, "One who prepares for Sabbath, eats on Sabbath".

This Talmudic discussion teaches man that in both spheres of our existence, God is providing us with direction. He wishes us to earn the next, final world. So we are reminded

once yearly through an Earthly model of a decree for a year. Waking up to the fact that our actions during the 10 Days of Repentance can determine our yearly fate, we thereby realize the ultimate fate that is determined by our lifetime. Thereby, God awakens mankind to our temporal stay, and the dire need for our attention to this vital matter. But the Earth goes on...and we must also realize its significance. So God metes out reward and punishment at many yearly intervals to keep us on track regarding our values, here.

But as we engage life on a day-to-day basis, even more often than once yearly God removes the blinders that convince us all that exists is our physical existence. He reminds us that the physical world is controlled by a higher world: God's providence. We learn this by seeing that whatever we spend to beautify these three mitzvahs does not diminish our wealth. People who realize this is so, do not become desperate. They do not assess their situations based on observable phenomena alone. They are convinced God can and will assist them. And being judged for the entire year, we are further focused on our true existence that outlives our Earthly stay.

Just as a yearly judgment calls to our minds our eternal afterlife, weekly too, God endorses the man and woman who detach from physical values, and spend generously through reimbursing them. ■



# Rosh Hashanah: How is God Found?

**RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM**

“Seek out God [in a manner that] He is found; call to Him when He is near”. (Isaiah 55:6)

This verse commences our Torah reading on fast days. At first glance, it implies that God is not “always” approachable. However, that is impossible, for the Ashray prayer teaches us “God is close to all who call Him, to all who call Him in truth. The will of those who fear Him He fulfills; and their cries, He hears and saves them”. These two “traits” of God are not further qualified that God only responds at certain times. So if God is readily accessible at all times, what does our verse above mean?

Radak cites three explanations on “call to Him when He is near”. He first quotes his father: “This means when one seeks out God with his “entire” heart, as it says “God is close to all who call Him, to all who call Him in truth”.

Notice, that verse does not mention any idea of an “entire heart”. Rather, it refers to our need to call Him in “truth”. Radak’s father clearly equates “all one’s heart”, and “truth”. Only when one seeks God earnestly, and exclusively, is he inline with truth. For when one relies on God alone, he agrees with what is true in the universe: God is the only one who can respond. To be clear, this explains, “when He is near” to mean, when we call to God and no other. God is close to such a person and performs their will, as this will endorse the truth God wishes spread in the world: God alone answers man. But if one does not feel convinced God alone can respond, and he relies on anything else, God will not respond, since that would endorse that falsehood.

If we do not value our relationship with God over all else, with our “entire heart”, then we have the wrong view of God. He must play a central role in our lives, for He created our lives, and maintains them! How can anything else take



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## Perfection

precedence? So the command to love God with all our hearts is simply stating what the facts demand. Shima says this as well: "And you shall love your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your might". Deuteronomy 30:6, 4:29 and Selichos repeat this crucial message.

We see from this that it's not just New Year's or fast days, but this concept of approaching God with our entire heart should be expressed throughout the year.

Radak then quotes the Rabbis who explain "Call to Him when He is near" as referring to "before our decree". This means before Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. Our fate is decided at this time, so we are admonished to seek out God, establish a relationship, and repent, before our decree is written. And lastly, Radak quotes Yonasan ben Uzziel as referring to prior to death: "for one can only call to God while alive, and not after he dies. For in the grave, there are no actions, knowledge or wisdom". On this, King Solomon said, "At all times, let your clothes be white [clean]..." (Koheles 9:8) This refers to the need to be without sin at all times (clean garments) since we do not know when God will call us to the next world. So be always ready in case it is now, in order that we are without sin as we enter the Afterlife, so to escape punishment.

In fact, there is no argument among these three views. Radak's father is advising us of what the Torah says in so many places: we can only truly relate to God, when our ideas of His exclusive and omnipotent nature are obtained. For if our ideas are false, we are not relating to God, but to an imaginary being, and no imaginary thing can help us. So we must strive to be accurate in our understanding of what God is and is not, as much as we can, basing ourselves on Torah. Then we will realize He alone must be the sole recipient of our prayers. This is what it means to "call to Him when He is near". God is not physical, so one cannot be "near" God. "Near" means when we have an accurate understanding of Him, and we express it by calling Him alone.

The Rabbis, Rashi, and Yonasan ben Uzziel teach that before our decree, we are wise to act. These views focus on the "gravity" of what is at hand: our lives. They address the absoluteness of God's decrees, not the "method of approach" described by Radak's father.

In our verse, Isaiah is addressing this time of year, when our fate will be written. He is concerned for us all, so let us be concerned, and review our ways. Make amends with those you have wronged; ask God's forgiveness for sins between you and him and resign never to repeat

such actions; and earnestly seek an ever-growing understanding of what God is, so your prayers reach the One who can help.

With so many conflicting views today, concerning what are Judaism's core fundamentals, we have but one choice: agree only to that which your mind sees as clearly as  $2+2=4$ . Anything less, means your mind does not agree with a notion, so what use is it to parrot the words "I agree", when you do not?

In Halacha – Jewish Law – we must follow the Rabbis of old, and of today. But in philosophy, Hashkafa, there is no such thing as a Psak, a ruling. We cannot be told by any Rabbi, or anyone, that we believe what we truly do not.

God gave us each a mind. Why? He wants each one of us to use it. If you do not use it, but follow the crowd, even the religious crowd, or Rabbis, then you violate God's will.

I mention this, since we are discussing the need to call God "when He is near", meaning, calling Him accurately. The most fundamental thing you can do, now before your fate is written, is to first insure you have the right notions of God. Most schools never teach this. Most adults cannot answer, "What is God?". Many pop-Jewish groups talk about sefirot, parts of God inside man, and other inconceivable and dangerous notions. Who is correct? How do we know? "Reason" will tell you. God gave you reason, so as to dismiss fallacy, and accept truth. If like me, you do not know what mystical ideas mean; it is most probably because such notions are meaningless, and because mysticism – belief in powers other than God – isn't part of Judaism and reality.

Do you want to know what ideas are true? Then refer to Moses' words, and all the prophets. They never spoke of mysticism, or things that made no sense. Just the opposite is the case: Moses told the Jews not to forget what their eyes saw. He asked no belief whatsoever, but that each Jew accept reason to determine what is true, and what God is. No prophet ever endorsed amulets, segulahs, praying to the dead, or any of today's popular falsehoods. Moses and the prophets endorsed reason, and abiding by God's commands, "Do not add or subtract from the Torah". They did not invent new styles of clothing as a means to publicize false piety. They added no new practices, and they never ran to others to bless them. They sought God "with their entire heart". They sought God alone, and nothing else.

Go back to the source, to the Torah. If you cannot find it there, don't follow it. ■







# Scholar Claims to Find 1,000 Year-Old Jewish Capital

*Monday,  
September 22, 2008*

MOSCOW — A Russian archaeologist says he has found the lost capital of the Khazars, a powerful nation that adopted Judaism as its official religion more than 1,000 years ago, only to disappear leaving little trace of its culture.

Dmitry Vasilyev, a professor at Astrakhan State University, said his nine-year excavation near the Caspian Sea has finally unearthed the foundations of a triangular fortress of flamed brick, along with modest yurt-shaped dwellings, and he believes these are part of what was once Itil, the Khazar capital.

By law Khazars could use flamed bricks only in the capital, Vasilyev said. The general location of the city on the Silk Road was confirmed in medieval chronicles by Arab, Jewish and European authors.

"The discovery of the capital of Eastern Europe's first feudal state is of great significance," he told The Associated Press. "We should view it as part of Russian history."

Kevin Brook, the American author of "The Jews of Khazaria," e-mailed Wednesday that he has followed the Itil dig over the years, and even though it has yielded no Jewish artifacts, "Now I'm as confident as the archaeological team is that they've truly found the long-lost city, The Khazars were a Turkic tribe that roamed the steppes from Northern China to the Black Sea. Between the 7th and 10th centuries they conquered huge swaths of what is now southern Russia and Ukraine, the Caucasus Mountains and Central Asia as far as the Aral Sea.

Itil, about 800 miles south of Moscow, had a population of up to 60,000 and occupied 0.8 square miles of marshy plains southwest of the Russian Caspian Sea port of Astrakhan, Vasilyev said.

It lay at a major junction of the Silk Road, the trade route between Europe and China, which "helped Khazars amass giant profits," he said.

The Khazar empire was once a regional superpower, and Vasilyev said his team has found "luxurious collections" of well-preserved ceramics that help identify cultural ties of the Khazar state with Europe, the Byzantine Empire and even Northern Africa. They also found armor, wooden kitchenware, glass lamps and cups, jewelry and vessels for transporting precious balms dating back to the eighth and ninth centuries, he said.

But a scholar in Israel, while calling the excavations interesting, said the challenge was to find Khazar inscriptions.

"If they found a few buildings, or remains of buildings, that's interesting but does not make a big difference," said Dr. Simon Kraiz, an expert on Eastern European Jewry at Haifa University. "If they found Khazar writings, that would be very important."

Vasilyev says no Jewish artifacts have been found at the site, and in general, most of what is known about the Khazars comes from chroniclers from other, sometimes competing cultures and empires.

"We know a lot about them, and yet we know almost

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nothing: Jews wrote about them, and so did Russians, Georgians, and Armenians, to name a few," said Kraiz. "But from the Khazars themselves we have nearly nothing."

The Khazars' ruling dynasty and nobility converted to Judaism sometime in the 8th or 9th centuries. Vasilyev said the limited number of Jewish religious artifacts such as mezuzas and Stars of David found at other Khazar sites prove that ordinary Khazars preferred traditional beliefs such as shamanism, or newly introduced religions including Islam.

Yevgeny Satanovsky, director of the Middle Eastern Institute in Moscow, said he believes the Khazar elite chose Judaism out of political expediency — to remain independent of neighboring Muslim and Christian states. "They embraced Judaism because they wanted to remain neutral, like Switzerland these days," he said.

In particular, he said, the Khazars opposed the Arab advance into the Caucasus Mountains and were instrumental in containing a Muslim push toward eastern Europe. He compared their role in eastern Europe to that of the French knights who defeated Arab forces at the Battle of Tours in France in 732.

The Khazars succeeded in holding off the Arabs, but a young, expanding Russian state vanquished the Khazar empire in the late 10th century. Medieval Russian epic poems mention Russian warriors fighting the "Jewish Giant."

"In many ways, Russia is a successor of the Khazar state," Vasilyev said.

He said his dig revealed traces of a large fire that was probably caused by the Russian conquest. He said Itil was rebuilt following the fall of the Khazar empire, when ethnic Khazars were slowly assimilated by Turkic-speaking tribes, Tatars and Mongols, who inhabited the city until it was flooded by the rising Caspian Sea around the 14th century.

The study of the Khazar empire was discouraged in the Soviet Union. The dictator Josef Stalin, in particular, detested the idea that a Jewish empire had come before Russia's own. He ordered references to Khazar history removed from textbooks because they "disproved his theory of Russian statehood," Satanovsky said.

Only now are Russian scholars free to explore Khazar culture. The Itil excavations have been sponsored by the Russian-Jewish Congress, a nonprofit organization that supports cultural projects in Russia.

"Khazar studies are just beginning," Satanovsky said. ■



# Trusting the Torah's Sages

*Rav Shimshon Raphael Hirsch*

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## What Chazal Knew and What We Know

### Teach Contemporary Science

What do we tell our pupils when they discover in the words of Chazal statements that do not agree with contemporary secular knowledge, particularly with the natural sciences which have made tremendous forward strides since ancient times?

Before us lies a paved road that protects our pupils from stumbling-blocks, and I think it is the true road.

First of all, we are not to keep the pupils from studying these subjects. On the contrary, we are to teach them the methodology of these subjects in a satisfactory and enlightening manner. For only the masses who neither know nor understand the methodology of these disciplines believe all the boasts of our contemporaries that this generation is the wisest of all and that all of nature - in the heavens and on earth - has been revealed to the contemporary sages who from the peaks of their wisdom look down upon all preceding generations.

But one who knows and understands how these disciplines function, knows and understands that while it is true that contemporary scholars deserve honor and glory in many matters that they have demonstrated - measured, weighed, or counted - that were unknown in earlier generations; nevertheless the theories built upon these observations are for the most part no more than very shaky guesses. New hypotheses are proposed daily. What is praised today as unalterable truth, is questioned tomorrow and then ignored. Each is different from the others, but they all have no solid foundation.

Similarly, there are statements in the works of the ancient nations that only 50 to 100 years ago were laughed at or denounced as lies by the wise men of the generation, whereas today's scholars recognize that there is some truth in them. There are matters of wisdom that were known to the ancients which have been lost and are unknown to the contemporaries. Consequently if we find statements in the works of the ancients that contradict the estimates of our contemporaries, we cannot decide instantly that the former are lies and that the latter are definitely right.

### Sages of Torah, not Masters of Science

In my opinion, the first principle that every student of Chazal's statements must keep before his eyes is the following: Chazal were the sages of G-d's law - the receivers, transmitters, and teachers of His toros, His mitzvos, and His interpersonal laws. They did not especially master the natural sciences, geometry, astronomy, or medicine - except insofar as they needed them for knowing, observing, and fulfilling the Torah. We do not find that this knowledge was transmitted to them from Sinai.

Nowadays too it is enough for the non-specialist to know about any of these areas of knowledge whatever contemporary experts teach that is generally accepted as true. This applies to the lawyer vis-a-vis all other areas, to the mathematician and the astronomer regarding the natural sciences, and to the expert on flora regarding all other areas. We expect none of them to seek out the truth and satisfy his inclinations in any field other than his own specialty.

Moreover, even in the area where one is an expert, it is neither possible for him nor expected of him to know everything through personal investigation and experience. Most of his knowledge rests upon the investigations of others. If they have erred it is not his fault. It is sufficient and praiseworthy if his knowledge encompasses all that is accepted as true at his time and place and generation. The greatness of his wisdom is in no way belittled if in a later generation it is discovered that some of the things he maintained or accepted on the authority of others are unreliable. The same is true for Chazal in these areas. The greatest of them knew all the wisdom and science of all the great non-Jewish scholars whose wisdom and teachings became famous in their generations.

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Imagine if a scholar such as Humboldt had lived in their times and had traveled to the ends of the world for his biological investigations. If upon his return he would report that in some distant land there is a humanoid creature growing from the ground or that he found mice that had been generated from the soil and had in fact seen a mouse that was half earth and half flesh, and his report had been accepted by the world as true, wouldn't we expect Chazal to discuss the Torah aspects that apply to these instances? What laws of defilement and decontamination apply to these creatures? Or would we expect them to go on long journeys to find out whether what the world has accepted is really true? And if, as we see things today, these instances are considered fiction, can Chazal be blamed for ideas that were accepted by the naturalists of their times? And this is what really happened. These statements are to be found in the works of Pliny, who lived in Rome at the time the Second Temple was destroyed, and who collected in his books on nature all that was well-known and accepted in his day.

The Talmud in Bava Kama declares "A human spine, after seven years, turns into a snake; this applies only if he did not kneel at Modim. " Anyone who reads this finds it laughable, but Pliny says the same statement almost word for word, "After a number of years the human spine turns into a snake." Chazal, however, used this to teach a mussor lesson. To any mind it is clear that every similarly surprising statement of Chazal, if we look into it, was accepted as true by the scholars of the time.

We find that Chazal themselves considered the wisdom of the gentile scholars equal to their own in the natural sciences. To determine who was right in areas where the gentile sages disagreed with their own knowledge, they did not rely on their tradition but on reason. Moreover they even respected the opinion of the gentile scholars, admitting when the opinion of the latter seemed more correct than their own. In the Talmud we learn:

The Jewish sages said, "By day the sun passes beneath the firmament and at night above it." The sages of the nations maintained, "By day beneath the firmament and at night beneath the ground." And Rabi said, "Their opinion seems more correct than ours. "

To my thinking, this clearly proves what I have been saying. This is my approach to the study of these areas with my limited faculties. If I have erred, may HaShem forgive my errors.

**Learn to Say, "I do not know"**

I wish to add one more point - in my opinion an essential rule for every person who teaches our holy Torah, whether Tanach or Halachah or Agadah. That is: Get into the habit of saying, "I don't know." It is not within a teacher's power nor is it his obligation - to know everything and to resolve every difficulty. Even Chazal left a number of matters unresolved, all the more so lesser people like ourselves. Let us admit unashamedly before our pupils, "This is something we do not know."

We must be extremely cautious not to create a forced explanation for a verse or a statement in Agadah or a statement in the Talmud simply in order to cover our ignorance. When we admit that we do not know, our pupils learn to humble themselves before the wisdom of Chazal and all the more so before the statements of G-d and the expressions of His holy spirit.

**Is Agadah from Sinai?****A Dangerous Approach**

You are of the opinion that the agados were received [by Moshe from G-d] at Sinai, and that there is no distinction in this respect between them and the halachic statements that were transmitted. As far as my limited mind can grasp, this is a dangerous approach that poses a grave danger for the pupils who grow up believing this concept. For it very nearly opens the gates of heresy before them.

What should these wretches do if they hear from their teachers today, "Agadic statements were transmitted at Sinai just like the main body of Torah," and then they discover the declarations of the greatest of our early talmudic commentators (rishonim) upon whom all of Jewry relies - in which one of them says,

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“Agadic statements are not articles of faith but reasonable assumptions,” and another says, “They were stated as exaggerations,” or “as one man speaks to another, making statements that are not intended to be true but to entertain their listener for a while,” or “They narrated what they had dreamed,” or “Learn from [Agadah] only things that make sense,” and so on? What are these wretches to do when they read these and similar declarations about statements they were taught by their teachers to believe came from Sinai with no difference between them and the main body of Torah?

### **The Road to Life**

They will find themselves in great spiritual danger, ready to reject both equally and to accept only what their little brains comprehend. It would be better for them not to study Torah and mitzvot in depth and simply to keep mitzvot by rote rather than tread this dangerous path! Which is why it is my humble opinion that we are not to budge from the road to life shown us by our rishonim when they made a major and intrinsic distinction between statements made as transmissions from G-d to Moshe and statements made as Agadah. Their very names speak for themselves. The former were transmitted from master to disciple, and their original source is a human ear hearing from the mouth of Moshe who heard at Sinai. The latter, though transmitted from master to disciple (for many agadic statements are introduced by a disciple in the name of his master and sometimes even in the name of the master's master), have their origin in what the originating scholar stated as his own opinion in accord with his broad understanding of Tanach and the ways of the world, or as statements of mussor and fear of G-d to attract his audience to Torah and mitzvot.

You cite statements in Yalkut Shim'oni, Talmud Yerushalmi, and Maseches Soferim, all of which imply that agadic statements were told to Moshe at Sinai. You also point out that the Talmud forbids men in a certain state of defilement to study Agadah as well as Halachah.

### **What Is Agadah?**

Allow me to posit a general principle: agadic statements are surely not ordinary or irrelevant statements. They are extremely precious statements which are surely pertinent to the intention of the Torah's Giver, blessed is He. For, beyond the study and transmission of the details of Jewish practice so that Jewry should know how to act, every scholar to whom G-d grants the ability to do so, draws wisdom and mussor from the well of Torah and mitzvot according to his time and place, and according to his understanding and talents, in order to draw Jewish hearts to love of G-d and of His Torah. These are the darshonim of every generation.<sup>38</sup> In his lectures, each of them develops his unique style in accord with his nature and spirit. There is no doubt that this form of expression is acceptable to G-d so long as it does not stray from the way of truth and uprightness. It is acceptable and part of His intention from the very giving of His Torah, when He informed Moshe of these aspects of Torah, too - but in a general way, without going into all the details that some scholar might at some time express publicly in a lecture. He transmitted it generally so that each scholar could develop his own ideas and produce fresh flowers in the garden of Torah and mitzvot to please G-d and man. It is no wonder that defiled men may not learn Agadah any more than Halachah, for agadic statements are as a whole considered part of Torah and most of them are based on verses in Tanach.

You cite from the Talmud that agadic works are categorized as Oral Torah which it was forbidden to put in writing. But this does not mean that they originated at Sinai. Many statements were not made at Sinai, yet were forbidden to be put into writing. These include every new insight (chidush) the Sages discovered based on their own reasoning; laws they established for situations that arose in their times; commentaries, distinctions, and derivations that they arrived at in order to clarify halachos; as well as all their amendments and decrees. It is clear that the lesson of “kesov lecho ess hadevorim hoeileh write these things for yourself,” means that “these” you put in writing but you do not put into writing anything else related to Torah, including agados.

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### Traditions That Are Not from Sinai

You write that there are [agadic] statements about which it is impossible to say that Chazal invented them, such as the statement by Rabbi Yochanon bar Chanina<sup>41</sup> that the earth for Adam HoRishon was piled up during the first hour of the morning, etc., particularly since [you say,] a major area of Halachah is based on this statement: the computation of the new moons. Similarly, many other midroshim have no basis or root in Tanach, nor are they logically inferable; they must surely be traditions transmitted from master to disciple.

You are surely right in saying that there are many statements which those who related them did not arrive at by their own reasoning, but had received from their masters. This is particularly true for historical incidents such as the stories of Avrohom in Ur Kasdim or the life of Moshe before he was chosen to be G-d's emissary, and similar stories. A clear proof of this is that we find agadic stories recounted by later talmudic sages (amoro'im) which are found almost word for word in the writings of Philo of Alexandria who lived several hundred years before them at the time of the Second Temple. Yet even these stories need not have been transmitted from Sinai, but could have been part of the national heritage from earlier generations. It seems reasonable to assume that historical details were transmitted from the earliest generations - those of Adam, Enosh, Noach, and Eiver to Avrohom and from him to his descendants.

Nevertheless, to my limited intelligence, it seems impossible to swear that all those stories are true and to compare them to those told by Moshe and the other prophets. Some of them may have been stated as parables for some mussor or intellectual purpose. And even if someone were to say that the tales of Avrohom's early life with Terach and Nimrod in Ur Kasdim were parables inferred from Avrohom's having recognized his Creator at the age of three and from HaShem's statement "I am HaShem who took you out of Ur Kasdim," one could not invalidate his position. I can demonstrate that. According to the opinion in Chazal that Avrohom did not convert until he was 48 or older there is no room for any of these stories; if they had been accepted by Jewry as Torah truth, there would be no way to set his conversion at so late a date. Do not be surprised at this [contradiction], for even about the story of Iyov some of Chazal maintain that it was only a parable to teach wisdom, mussor, and fear of G-d in the form of a lofty story that tugs at people's hearts.

### Impossible?

It seems to me that this applies as well to the statement you cited about the day of Adam's creation. You write that it is impossible for Chazal to have made this statement without a genuine tradition, particularly since a major area of Halachah - calculating lunar and solar cycles - is based on this statement.

It seems possible that this statement was made, not as the report of an incident that really took place, but was derived agadically from the verse, "V'odom biykor bal yolin." I can demonstrate that this is reasonable. The preceding statement of Rav Osha'ya quoting Rav is no more than a reasonable guess; see Rashi there. I recall having seen some sage wonder about Rabbi Yochanon ben Chanina's statement: "How can you say that the creation of Adam was begun immediately at the beginning of the sixth day? Didn't the creation of animals, beasts, and crawling creatures precede Adam on that very day?" He thus demonstrates that Rabbi Yochanon bar Chanina's statement was not made to teach history but is an Agadah that teaches a moral or intellectual lesson.

According to Rabbi Shelomo Ibn Aderes in his commentary to the Agados, the agadah of the moon's protesting and being punished is only a parable to teach us wisdom and mussor. Is this reason to, G-d forbid, undermine the basis for determining our months and our yomim tovim? This seems to be conclusive evidence of the truth of my position.

### Further Proofs Are Not Convincing

You point to the 32 principles by which Agadah is derived, one of which is "parallel texts" (gezeirah shovah) which no person may originate, but for which he must have a transmitted tradition. You wish to demonstrate from this that agadic statements were transmitted from Sinai. Forgive me, but we have no evidence that the principle that no one may originate his own gezeirah shovah applies to agadic statements. If you will take the trouble to study the borysa-text listing the 32 principles, you will find that most of its statements speak of midroshim of Nevi'im and Kesuvim, and that the midroshim cited for the principle of gezeirah shovah are all either on Nevi'im or Kesuvim or to derive Torah laws from statements in Nach (which cannot be done with the 13 [halachic] principles of Rabbi Yishmoel). It is absolutely impossible to say that these midroshim were transmitted at Sinai. ■